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ON PAGE B-15

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Mideast Advice Doesn't Always Benefit Reagan

The Reagan administration has suffered some embarrassing setbacks recently in the Middle East. The president's optimistic "peace initiative" for the region has stalled. Secretary of State George P. Shultz's shuttle diplomacy hasn't even been able to work out the withdrawal of Israeli and Syrian troops from Lebanon.

Part of the problem is that the president gets conflicting reports from diplomats and intelligence agents in the field. This information is screened by the president's top advisers, who tend to pass on only what he wants to hear—information that makes his predetermined policies or campaign promises look good.

Top-level reports are also the product of a committee mentality—a consensus, with no rough edges to irritate a president or nag him with doubts. The president, in turn, is persuaded to approve plans that have little chance of success.

The president's advisers, for example, confidently predicted that Jordan's King Hussein would sup-

port the Reagan peace initiative. I disputed that rosy assessment in a column last December. Sure enough, Hussein refused to join in the Reagan plan, effectively killing it.

More recently, the administration pushed through a troop withdrawal agreement with Israel that depended on Syrian cooperation. The White House seemed to think Syrian President Hafez Assad would agree to end his years-long occupation of eastern Lebanon. On April 29, I warned that this was unlikely. Assad has shown no indication that he will pull his troops out soon—or ever.

One reason for the administration's embarrassing misinterpretation of Assad's intentions may be the soothing syrup it was fed by the U.S. Embassy in Damascus. A secret cable to the State Department in early January demonstrates serious misjudgment of the Syrian dictator by our experts on the scene.

The secret cable, examined by my associate Lucette Lagnado, gave Washington advance knowledge of the Syrian-Soviet decision to deploy top-of-the-line Soviet missiles in Syria. "U.S. intelligence community believes Syria is preparing at least two sites for surface-to-air missiles of type SA5," the cable states, "and SA5 equipment will soon be shipped to Syria from the U.S.S.R."

But the embassy took this ominous development calmly. "We doubt that the installation of SA5s

will make the Assad regime more 'adventurous,'" the cable said.

Yet with super Soviet missiles to back him up, Assad remains at least as "adventurous" as he has always been. He has threatened a new war with Israel. He has ignored pleas from other Arab nations to pull his troops out of Lebanon. He has encouraged Palestine Liberation Organization extremists against Yasser Arafat. And he is suspected of backing major terrorist attacks, including the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut.

Incredibly, the embassy condoned the presence of Soviet personnel manning the SA5 missiles, suggesting that they would be a restraining influence on Assad.

What worried the embassy most was a pre-emptive strike against the missiles by Israel. The embassy urged Washington to restrain the Israelis from such a move.

The embassy experts at least showed some appreciation of Assad's troublesome tendencies when they commented on the possibility that Israel would ask the United States to make an approach—in diplomatic jargon, a demarche—to warn the Syrians against installation of the Soviet missiles.

"We believe no U.S. demarche to the Syrians... would be able to prevent the installation," the embassy warned. The experts were right: The United States did protest—in vain.